

See why students have so much fun. Tour Indiana's college towns.

By Sally Campbell Grout

When you visit a college town, are you basking in the glow of academia? Searching for a place to send your kids? Exploring the shops, restaurants, and museums that are little discoveries in themselves? Or simply trying to remember what it was like to party like it's 1999? Whatever your agenda, you'll find dozens of towns that are home to colleges and universities throughout Indiana. Here are just a few:

Go team(s) go.

If you live in Evansville, you're a good couple of hours (or more) from Indianapolis, St. Louis, Cincinnati, or any other city with a professional sports team. Perhaps that's why people here cheer so hard for the college teams from the University of Evansville (800-423-8633) and the University of Southern Indiana (812-464-8600). U of E was established in 1854. Its local counterpart was founded in 1965 as a regional campus of Indiana State University; USI became an independent state university in 1985.

But it's the town's library—not just the libraries on the campuses—that commands plenty of attention from locals and visitors. Willard Library (812-425-4309) is Indiana's oldest public library and is a great resource for genealogical research. And, as the legend goes, it's haunted by a lady in a gray gown who was first spotted by a janitor in 1937.

Those ready for a dose of fresh air and Mother Nature can visit Wessleson Woods Nature Preserve (812-479-0771), a National Natural Landmark and State Nature Preserve with 190 acres of virgin bottomland hardwood forest, wildlife observation areas, and great places for nature walks.

A big enough school for two towns.

Technically, Purdue University (765-494-4600) is located in West Lafayette, but there's plenty of enthusiasm for this Big 10 Conference school in next-door Lafayette, too. With an enrollment of more than 38,000, Purdue significantly impacts both towns.

While Purdue offers dozens of degrees and academic programs, many people immediately associate the university with engineering. Future engineers living in or visiting Lafayette will enjoy Imagination Station by ASSET, Inc. (765-420-7780). This interactive children's museum features displays and workshops related to space, science, engineering, and

technology. Are you more the “liberal arts” type? Spend some time at the Art Museum of Greater Lafayette (765-742-1128), which offers permanent American and Indiana art collections, changing exhibits, programs, and studio classes.

A lot of places—in one place--to get smart.

Larry Bird may have helped put Terre Haute on the map during his time at Indiana State University (800-GO-TO-ISU). But this institution, which began life as a place where future teachers learned their craft, has actually been around since the 1800s. And, it’s not the only school in town. Terre Haute is also home to Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology (812-877-1511) and St. Mary-of-the-Woods (812-535-5151), the nation’s oldest Catholic women’s college.

But what do the locals do for fun? The Bleemel Building & The Terre Haute Brewery Co. & Tap Room & Museum (812-234-2800), home of an original 1837 brewery, serves lunch and dinner—and celebrates historic beer and root beer. Those Midwesterners feeling land-locked can spend some time at Inland Aquatics (812-232-9000). This 13,000-square-foot facility houses more than 35,000 gallons of salt water production tanks, making it America’s largest public coral reef display.

Ring that bell!

The most top-of-mind Indiana rivalry may be the Purdue University-Indiana University football contest for the Oaken Bucket. But students at Wabash College (765-361-6100) in Crawfordsville and DePauw University in Greencastle (765-658-4800) fight just as hard for the Monon Bell, a trophy that weighs in at approximately 300 pounds! Wabash is one of just three all-male private colleges in the United States; U.S. News & World Report recently ranked DePauw as 7th in the nation for best value among liberal arts colleges. Both schools are located in charming towns that are filled with places parents will love to explore. In Historic Downtown Crawfordsville (800-866-3973), antique malls and other stores are all within walking distance of each other. In Greencastle, Locust Hill Antiques and Gallery (765-653-1260) offers antiques and gifts in an 1830s home listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Cheer, cheer for the whole town of South Bend.

Just how beautiful is the campus of the University of Notre Dame (574-631-5000)? If you’ve only seen it on television, you haven’t really seen it at all. Highlights of a tour of the 1,250-acre campus include the Basilica of the Sacred Heart, the Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes, the Log Chapel, the Hesbergh Library and the famous Golden Dome. Save plenty of time for the Snite Museum of Art, which contains more than 21,000 works.

Venture off campus and you'll find plenty more to see, including the College Football Hall of Fame (574-235-9999), The South Bend Chocolate Company Factory & Museum (800-301-4961), the Studebaker National Museum (574-235-9714) and the Northern Indiana Center for History (574-235-9664).

Thank those glass jars.

When the Ball brothers, Muncie industrialists whose name dons countless glass jars, purchased a private school for the state of Indiana in 1918, they could hardly have foreseen the advent of television. Or that the school, which would become Ball State University (765-289-1242), would develop a respected broadcasting program among many other courses of study, such as architecture. Or that one of its students would go on to become one of America's favorite TV stars. (That's David Letterman, in case you didn't know.)

But maybe they would have hoped that Ball State would become the heart and soul of the town of Muncie, which it has. Today, the school offers world-class entertainment, sporting events, and even incredible exhibits at the Ball State Art Museum. The town itself has plenty to offer, too. A trip here should include a visit to the National Model Aviation Museum (800-435-9262), a 1,000-acre center representing more than 200 years of aeromodeling history. Another must for your itinerary: the Muncie Children's Museum (765-286-1660), where permanent attractions include a Garfield Cartooning Exhibit, a Model Railroad, Water Works, and Under Indiana.

Bloomington: beautiful on and off campus.

Any student attending Indiana University (812-855-4848) in Bloomington would be doing himself (or herself) a disservice if he (or she) didn't look up from the books and walk around this incredible campus. Beautifully landscaped and architecturally rich, IU is worth exploring. Its IU Art Museum, for starters, was designed by the world-renowned architecture firm I.M. Pei and Partners, and includes works by Claude Monet and Jackson Pollack. Other campus landmarks, such as the Sample Gates, the Rose Well House, and Showalter Fountain, are equally inspiring.

Bloomington off campus is also incredibly vibrant. Monroe Lake Reservoir (812-837-9546) provides plenty of opportunities for outdoor fun. The Irish Lion Restaurant & Pub (812-336-9076) offers authentic Irish food and drink in a historic 1882 building. Butler Winery and Vineyards (812-339-7233) and Oliver Winery (800-25-TASTE) offer beautiful grounds and locally made wine.

A capital place to go to school.

A city as big as Indianapolis may not be thought of first and foremost as a college town, but it does offer great opportunities for students and several locations to study. What's more, these schools give a lot back to the city. On the campus of Butler University (800-368-6852), Clowes Memorial Hall (317-940-6444) presents music, dance, and national touring productions of Broadway shows. On the campus of IUPUI (317-274-1501)--that's Indiana University/Purdue University Indianapolis--the gallery at the Herron School of Art (317-920-2420) presents contemporary works created by regional, national, and international artists, while world-class sports facilities welcome athletes and fans to national events. And Marian College (317-955-6000) is home to two historic mansions.

What's beyond the campus boundaries? A spectacular city that may have a reputation as a sports town, but is quickly earning a second one as a cultural hub. Landmarks on Foot (317-639-4534), which runs from May to October and serves as Indianapolis' only regularly scheduled sightseeing tours, can direct you to some great spots, but you may want to add a few to your "must see" list. The sprawling Indiana State Museum (317-232-1637) offers a detailed look at what makes the state the place it is. Indiana War Memorials Parks and Monuments (317-232-7614), at various downtown locations, honor those who have served. And the Indiana Repertory Theatre (317-635-5252) presents nine plays a year in the historic Indiana Theatre.

More to know.

There are several other colleges—and college towns—throughout the state. Discover more charming Indiana communities at enjoyindiana.com.